



SIERRA LEONE: Transforming gender norms through the Gender Model Family Approach

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Carolyn Rosenberg

Transforming gender norms through the Gender Model Family Approach

Extreme gender inequality persists in the West African country of Sierra Leone, despite increased political efforts to promote gender equality. Women are severely discriminated in terms of access to education, health services and economic opportunities. Moreover, gender-based violence is widespread.

In this context, the project titled ‘Linking Agriculture, Natural Resource Management and WASH towards Nutrition Security’ (LANN+), implemented by Welthungerhilfe in collaboration with the local NGO SEND Sierra Leone from 2017 to 2022, employed the Gender Model Family Approach. Therein, couples are sensitized to gender equality, instructed to reflect on gender roles and norms, and encouraged to act as role models in their communities.

The present study demonstrates that this has resulted in lasting changes of gender norms and roles at household level: workloads are distributed more equitably, women are more involved in decision-making processes, and financial resources are increasingly managed jointly. This goes hand in hand with a reduction of the number of intra-family conflicts. At the same time, transforming deeply rooted discriminatory social norms remains a challenge. Integrated approaches that link gender work with tangible improvements of living conditions can increase the target group’s willingness to address gender issues. At the same time it is necessary to take the respective socio-cultural context into account and to coordinate closely with local actors to ensure long-term gender-transformative effects.

gender roles, gender norms, gender-transformative approaches, Gender Model Family Approach, Sierra Leone

Country and project background



In 2023 the West African Republic of Sierra Leone was home to 8.46 million people, 4.71 million of whom lived in rural areas and 3.75 million in urban areas (World Bank Group, n.d.-b). The population is characterized by a high proportion of young people, with around 60% of the population being under the age of 25 (CIA 2025). The country’s demography is characterized by a high birth rate of almost four children per woman. However, population growth is limited by infant, child and maternal mortality rates which count among the highest in the world.



Sierra Leone is still one of the least developed countries in the world. The Human Development Index ranks the country 185th out of 193 countries surveyed (UNDP 2025: 276). Despite slight progress in recent years, more than half of the Sierra Leonean population lives below the national

poverty line. The Multidimensional Poverty Index puts the proportion of poor people at 59.2% (ibid.: 299). Around 26% of the population are considered extremely poor, i.e. living on less than US\$ 2.15 per day (ibid.). Although the proportion of undernourished people in Sierra Leone has fallen from 46.2% in 2004–2006 to 28.4% in 2021–2023, it still remains at a high level (FAO et al. 2024: 155). 32.3% of the people live in severely food insecure households (ibid.). Many people also have an unbalanced diet. Rice is the main staple food, followed by cassava, maize, peanuts and sweet potatoes.



The country's economy is heavily influenced by agriculture, which is primarily practised as subsistence farming. Agriculture is the main source of income for around 65% of all households (MAFS 2023: 5). However, the use of traditional, labour-intensive farming methods, inadequate agricultural equipment, a lack of seeds and fertilizers as well as a lack of access to agricultural financing and markets limit agricultural productivity. Agriculture, forestry and fishing accounted for around 29% of the gross domestic product in 2023 (World Bank Group, n.d.-a). Sierra Leone is also rich in raw materials, including diamonds, iron ore, bauxite and

gold, the export of which forms another important sector of the country's economy.

The socio-economic structure of Sierra Leone is strongly influenced by the country's recent history, particularly the civil war that took place between 1991 and 2002, which is considered one of the most violent conflicts of recent decades. Children were recruited as soldiers and many women and girls were victims of sexualized violence. Around two million people were displaced within the country and almost half a million citizens fled to neighbouring countries

(CIA 2025). The Ebola epidemic (2014 to 2016) further exacerbated the social and economic situation in the country, as did the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequences of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. High inflation and prevailing unemployment, particularly among young people, pose a persistent risk to Sierra Leone's political stability and social peace.

Another key challenge is the extreme gender inequality. Despite some progress, women's access to education, health services and economic opportunities remains limited. Sierra Leone ranks 152nd out of 172 in the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP 2025: 296). Gender-based violence is widespread, but there is a lack of up-to-date data. In 2019 more than half (62%) of the female population between the ages of 15 and 49 reported to have experienced physical and/or sexualized violence (Stats SL / ICF 2020: 300). Domestic violence against female

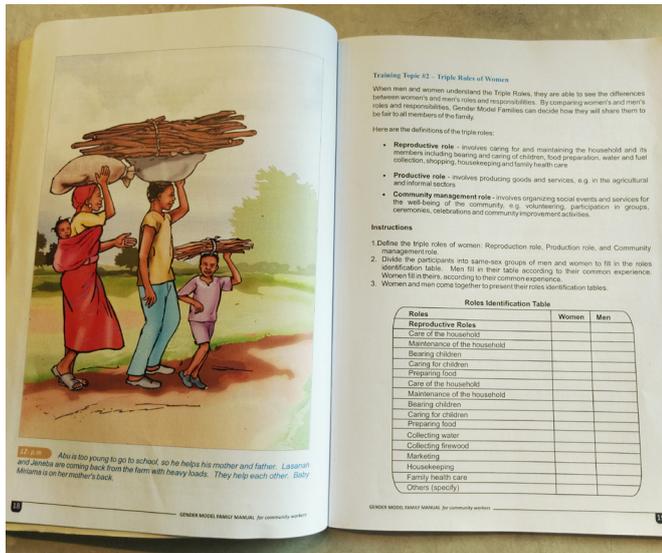
family members is particularly widespread. In addition, according to UNICEF, around 83% of women aged between 15 and 49 are affected by female genital mutilation (FGM) (UNICEF 2024). Data from 2019 suggests that around 70% of girls are circumcised before the age of 15 (Stats SL / ICF 2020: 329).

In recent years the Sierra Leonean government has paid increased attention to gender inequalities and introduced a series of laws and measures to combat them. For example, the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Act of 2022 includes, among other things, the obligation

to have at least 30 percent women in public and private decision-making bodies. The Customary Land Rights Act (2022) also stipulates that women must be involved in all decisions on land issues. In addition, the Gender in Agriculture Policy (GiAP) has been pursuing the goal of promoting gender equality in the agricultural sector since 2020. However, the implementation and enforcement of these legal provisions and strategies, particularly in rural areas, is still inadequate.

Goals and activities at a glance

The Gender Model Family (GMF) Approach was developed in the early 2000s by the non-governmental organization SEND Ghana and was initially piloted in northern Ghana. The approach, which can be used as a stand-alone measure and can also be integrated into other project activities, sees the family as the basic unit of social change. The aim is to reduce gender-specific inequalities and initiate long-term social change through so-called Gender Model Families (GMFs), each consisting of a married couple and, where applicable, their children.



The approach is implemented by several steps (for a detailed description, see SEND West Africa 2013): In the beginning, basic training takes place in the course of which community members are sensitized to gender issues. At the same time the support of local authorities such as chiefs, village heads, women's and youth representatives is obtained in order to ensure local acceptance and anchoring. Interested couples are then selected as GMFs. Subsequently, they are instructed to reflect critically on their everyday lives and coexistence and to initiate changes. To this end, an initial training session focuses on the division of domestic, care and paid work as

well as on decision-making processes within the family. In order to make the workload of each spouse visible, each participant draws up a daily activity profile, which is then discussed together. Based on this, each family formulates an individual action plan for a fairer distribution of tasks and resources within the household. At a second training session topics such as joint household management, (financial) decision-making processes, family planning, child rearing and cooperation in agricultural activities are discussed in greater depth. At regular meetings the Gender Model Families from the same or neighbouring communities exchange ideas, reflect on successes and challenges and motivate each other. In addition, the GMFs are encouraged to pass on what they have learned and to recruit at least three new families for the approach.

In Sierra Leone the GMF approach was integrated into the LANN+ project ('Linking Agriculture, Natural Resource Management and WASH towards Nutrition Security') from 2017 to 2022, implemented by the German NGO Welthungerhilfe (WHH) in collaboration with the local NGO SEND Sierra Leone. The project, which received 1.3 million Euros in funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), aimed to improve the food and nutrition security and living conditions of particularly vulnerable rural village communities in the districts of Kenema and Pujehun. To this end, LANN+ combined nutrition education and the promotion of sustainable agricultural production methods with measures to protect natural resources, create alternative sources of income and improve access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

LANN+ used the GMF approach in the context of community mobilization. The project worked with and through Gender Model Families as a target group. In course of the project activities they formed the starting point for nutrition education and other awareness-raising measures and in turn acted as multipliers at community level by passing on what they had learned as "change agents".

Since 2022 the GMF approach has been applied to the LANN+ follow-up project 'Nutrition Smart CommUNITY' (NSC) which is being implemented in Sierra Leone as well as in Malawi and Ethiopia.

Achieved project impacts

This study deals specifically with the Gender Model Family Approach applied to the LANN+ project. The aim of the study is to determine the achieved gender-transformative effects and to formulate lessons learned for the future use of the GMF approach.



The documentation of the achieved project impacts is based on reports by Welthungerhilfe and SEND Sierra Leone. On the other hand, this good practice study is based on the results of qualitative field research conducted in the capital Freetown and in four villages in the Kenema district in eastern Sierra Leone in January 2025. A total of 40 smallholder farmers (20 women, 20 men), who had received training as Gender Model Families between 2018 and 2020 as part of the LANN+ project, were interviewed in the course of eight gender-segregated focus group discussions (FGD). In addition, four FGDs were conducted with local dignitaries and influential people at village level, including youth and women's representatives, village leaders and GMF approach multipliers. In addition, interviews were conducted with employees of Welthungerhilfe and SEND Sierra Leone. At district level, representatives of the ministries involved in the project, namely the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security, the Ministry of Health (Nutrition Unit) and the Ministry of Social Welfare, the contact person for Gender and Child Protection at the Kenema District Council and the Scaling-Up Nutrition (SUN) Coordinator of Kenema District were also interviewed.

The FGD with Gender Model Families showed that the training programme triggered the intended self-reflection and a change in gender relations, which also had an impact beyond the end of the project. In particular, the creation of a daily activity profile proved to be a very helpful tool for breaking down misconceptions about the workload of household members: Both wives and husbands surveyed stated that before the training sessions extra work at home and at work was equated with physically hard work. However, the time required for these activities was not taken into account. For example, if a husband cuts down a tree in the field as a daily activity and then spends the rest of the day with other men in the village square, while the wife is busy with housework, care work and agricultural work from early in the morning until late in the evening, the excessive workload was still attributed to the husband.



The interviewees stated that the creation and joint discussion of the activity profile in particular had made them more aware of their spouses' activities. Consequently, the work is now shared more equally. Men in particular would now take on tasks that were previously left solely to their wives: They support with cooking, collect forest fruits, firewood or fetch water, help with cleaning and sweeping and take more care of the children. Several male interviewees stated that now, as a result, they had a much closer and more affectionate relationship with their children. At the same time some women reported an increased involvement in local decision-making processes, such as village development committees or WASH committees, as a result of the divisi-

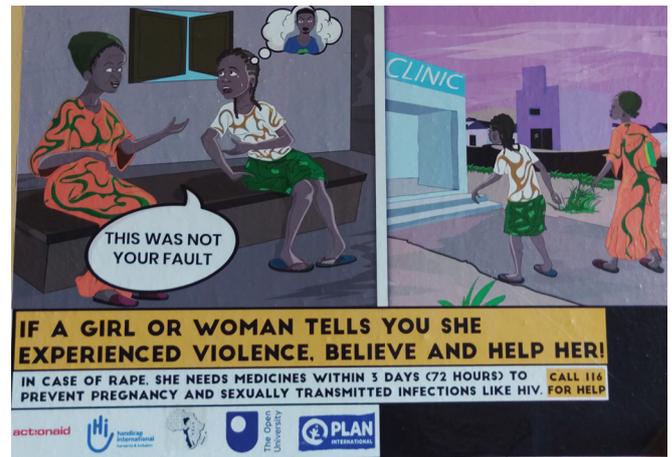
on of labour – a commitment that was previously hardly possible for them due to lack of time, among other things. Even though the GMF approach has thus brought about positive changes towards a more equal division of labour at household level and thus given women more time for other activities, the main burden of domestic and care work still lies with the female family members, especially the wives.

A fairer distribution of resources and decision-making power within the household was also positively emphasized by the respondents. The women in particular stated that they had a greater say as a result of the GMF training. Instead of one person – previously usually the husband – deciding on important matters alone, decisions, e.g. on the children's schooling or necessary health expenses, were now made jointly after prior discussion and responsibility was thus shared. Several model families interviewed also reported a new openness in communication with each other, particularly with regard to existing challenges, and increased transparency within the partnership.



Access to and control over financial and material resources would now also be organised more equally. The GMFs highlighted the Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA) introduced as part of LANN+, with both men and women being members, as a “game changer”. These are still active in three out of the four villages surveyed. According to the interviewees, saving together at the VSLA has led to financial household expenses being jointly discussed, planned and decided. Now, it is said, the husbands also ask their wives how much money they needed for household expenses such as food or cooking utensils, instead of providing them with

an arbitrary amount like before, regardless of whether this was sufficient or not. Nonetheless, at the household level the money is still generally managed by the husband, who is the final decision-making authority, particularly in the event of disagreement between the spouses. The households surveyed justified this with the husband's role as head of the family. Only in one of the households surveyed did the wife state that she controlled the financial resources.



According to the unanimous opinion of the households surveyed, the significantly improved culture of discussion between the spouses as a result of the GMF training as well as the increased awareness of each other's activities and needs had strengthened the sense of togetherness and had a very positive effect on harmony within the family. According to the subjective assessment of the FGD participants, conflicts and domestic violence had decreased significantly. Differences of opinion are discussed or mediation is used, both by other GMFs or village members, as well as by state counselling services. Representatives of the ministries working on women and children, however, speak of an increase in the number of cases of domestic and sexualized violence but attribute this primarily to awareness-raising campaigns, as a result of which cases are increasingly reported. Even if no conclusive statement can be made in the context of this study as to whether and to what extent the project activities have influenced the number of cases of domestic and/or sexualized violence, the GMFs in the context of the FGDs appeared to be sensitized to the issue.

Overall, the FGDs with the former target group of the project showed a consistently strong identification of these as Gender Model Families and a consistently positive assessment of the GMF approach. They particularly appreciated its focus on everyday life, which facilitated the practical implementation of the content taught in daily life. In none of the villages surveyed were there any families who had returned to their “old”, traditional way of life after the end

of the project activities. In the FGDs with local dignitaries in particular it became clear that Gender Model Families continue to act as role models and supervisors at community level, both in terms of equal gender relations at household level and when it comes to the implementation of other hygiene, nutritional and agricultural practices learned as part of LANN+.

Challenges and conditions for success

Recruiting families for the Gender Model Family Approach is a challenging task, as participation is voluntary, but at the same time not directly linked to concrete benefits or advantages that might be immediately apparent to participants. Rather, the approach requires a critical reflection on and change of traditional lifestyles, behavioural patterns, norms and values that are deeply rooted in society. This can (initially) be met with a lack of understanding or even resistance from the target group and their environment. As a result, there are often initial reservations, not only but particularly on the part of the husbands. Initial concerns include whether women will continue to respect the role of men as head of the household. In some cases fundamental questions are also raised about authority in the partnership, such as what would happen if women questioned their husbands as a result of the training and how discipline could be imposed in such cases. Some husbands also fear that they will have to work “slave-like” for their wives in the future.



An integrated approach has proven to be effective in increasing the willingness to participate. This combines raising the awareness of gender issues with more tangible content that is of direct relevance for the local population and thus serves as an incentive to participate in the training programme. This can also be seen by the example of the LANN+ project, when it was (initially) rather the prospects of a better nutritional situation and higher agricultural productivity than changed gender relations that motivated the families to voluntarily register as Gender Model Families. The FGDs showed that the initiative to become a model family did not come unilaterally from just one gender. In some families it was the husband, in others the wife, who pushed for participation.



Even after the end of the project the households surveyed still strongly linked the GMF approach with more “visible” benefits of other LANN+ components. For example, when asked which positive effects they had experienced as Gender Model Families, both men and women often initially mentioned issues such as improved health as a result of learned hygiene practices or an improvement of the nutritional situation due to dietary diversification, while positive gender effects were usually only mentioned if explicitly addressed.

Not only but especially when addressing sensitive topics such as gender roles and norms it is also beneficial if the implementation partner is already known and appreciated by the target group. An established relationship of trust facilitates access to the population and reduces possible resistance – the project therefore does not start out “from

scratch” but benefits from an already existing trust. At the same time, support from influential local authorities who support social change is key.

Representatives of the ministries as well as local project staff also emphasize the need for a context-sensitive approach and communication at eye level with the local population. An understanding of the need to turn away from individual and socially deeply rooted ways of thinking and acting that (re-)produce gender inequalities must be promoted, but without creating defensive attitudes. For example, existing negative practices, such as the marriage of underage daughters, should not be criticized in a condemnatory manner. Instead, in order to bring about constructive change, the empathetic communication of accessible messages is crucial, focusing in particular on existing prohibitions of those practices and information about possible negative consequences.



At the same time, an exchange with like-minded people who are also committed to more equal gender relations can have a motivating and supportive effect. The regular meetings of the model families provided for by the GMF approach – both at community and district level – are therefore a key condition for success. However, according to SEND Sierra Leone employees, other structures introduced as part of the LANN+ project, such as the regular meetings of the VSLA, are also used by model families to serve as a platform for mutual exchange beyond their actual purpose.

The logic of social change induced by the Gender Model Family Approach, especially given the limited project duration, is largely based on the sensitized model families independently passing on what they have learned and

recruiting new families as GMFs. Especially after the end of the project, however, such a transfer according to the cascade principle is hampered by a lack of resources for implementation. For example, there is a lack of transportation to reach neighbouring communities or money to offer the meals that are usually provided during the training sessions. In some cases there is also a general lack of motivation to continue the commitment on one’s own after the end of the project.



In addition, there is the risk that without refresher or follow-up training for the trained GMFs the application of the practices learned may decline over time or that content may be passed on to others incorrectly or incompletely. With regard to the sustainability of the project measures, in particular the gender-transformative effects that have been initiated, it therefore seems necessary to repeatedly remind the target group of key content. At the same time, funding and responsibility questions arise for any refresher training after the end of the project. Targeted networking of the target group with existing state structures, which in turn raise the awareness of gender issues, is therefore important.

In discussions with representatives of the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs and the Ministry of Social Welfare, the radio was also highlighted as a proven tool for disseminating information, as it reaches a broad target group, especially in remote rural areas. The ministries already use this medium, for example, to raise awareness of the relevant issues on the occasion of international days of action, such as the International Youth Day or the so-called Orange Days, which draw attention to gender-based violence, and to inform people about the current legal situation in Sierra Leone. The farmers surveyed confirmed using the radio and stated that they had been informed about the GEWE

Act on the radio, for example. Such information channels already used by the target group should be made use of in a targeted manner, for example by preparing the training content of the GMF approach in radio programmes that can also be broadcast by ministries after the end of the project.



Further challenges for implementing the approach arise from the specific socio-cultural context. Polygamous households, in which one husband has several wives, are common in eastern Sierra Leone. The project initially also worked with polygamous families but allowed men to participate with only one of their wives. According to the local project staff of SEND Sierra Leone and WHH, this led to conflicts in the polygamous households, as the participating wife was seen by the other wives as being preferred by the husband. In response to the tensions created, polygamous families were prohibited from registering as Gender Model Families as the project progressed. According to SEND Sierra Leone, however, this sometimes led to polygamous households pretending to be monogamous and men concealing their other wives. Instead of a complete exclusion, the SEND Sierra Leone staff is now working on the creation of a GMF training manual that is adapted to the specific situation of polygamous households.

Furthermore, the GMF approach has only had a limited impact on harmful traditional practices and on overcoming them. These include the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), which is widespread in Sierra Leone and has not yet

been banned by law¹. This form of gender-based violence is practiced as part of the initiation ritual from girlhood to womanhood and is a prerequisite for acceptance into the so-called *Bondo Society* – traditional women's societies with considerable social influence. Not only is the practice still widely accepted in Sierra Leonean society. It is also still taboo to discuss it in public.

According to former project staff, FGM continues to be practiced even among the Gender Model Families which are considered to be comparatively enlightened. Although there is no reliable quantitative data available to support this, the great reluctance to address the issue indicates its continuing sensitivity. For example, during the field research, on the express advice of local WHH and SEND Sierra Leone staff, FGM was not openly addressed in focus group discussions, as asking direct questions on this topic would most likely bring interviews to an abrupt end. This indicates that two parallel processes have taken place so far in the context of sensitization and the creation of awareness of gender inequalities: On the one hand, as shown in the previous section, the GMF trainings contribute to the transformation of gender roles and an improvement in gender relations at household level. Resistance from other community members to the change processes in the model



families also appears to be largely absent. On the other hand, traditional practices – such as FGM – and the underlying, deeply rooted norms and power structures have so far remained largely untouched. This indicates that the change in awareness initiated by the GMF approach is primarily effective at an individual and interpersonal level but has (so far) been limited in terms of dismantling discriminatory gender norms and power hierarchies at a societal level.

¹It should be noted here that prevention and intervention work on female genital mutilation was neither explicitly nor implicitly part of the trainings provided as part of the LANN+ project.

Conclusions for development cooperation in general

► Tools such as creating daily activity profiles of different family members and the mapping of access to and control over certain resources and assets visualize inequalities at household level and help to make them more tangible for the target group. In training courses they can be used to encourage participants to reflect on themselves, to question unequal gender relations, and to change them to be more equitable.

► Particularly in the case of strongly patriarchal societies it is advisable to implement gender-transformative measures in conjunction with project activities whose content and objectives may be more appealing to the target group or whose benefits are easier to see. These measures can initially serve as an incentive to engage with more complex and less appealing topics, such as changes in power relations, norms and gender roles, as part of the overall program.

► The example of the Gender Model Family Approach and the initially insufficient consideration of the particular challenges associated with working with polygamous households once again demonstrates that a (gender-transformative) approach that works well in one context cannot simply be transferred to another country or sector context. It is imperative to adapt training content and materials to the respective socio-cultural context by means of a carefully conducted gender analysis in order to avoid overlooking specific gender inequalities and, in the worst case, reinforcing them. Special attention must always be paid to the intersectionality of discrimination structures.

► Gender inequalities affect different spheres of life, which in turn fall under the responsibility of various government agencies at different levels. A multi-stakeholder approach that brings together all relevant actors in the project region as well as good coordination among them is therefore urgently needed. At the same time it is important to connect the target group, especially women and other marginalized groups, with relevant (non-)governmental agencies and support services during the project period. It is only possible for individuals to access available support services if there is awareness of their existence. In Sierra Leone, for instance, the Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs provides mediation services and thus the opportunity to resolve disputes outside the community structures. It also refers victims of domestic and/or sexual violence to the relevant authorities.

► Social change, which lies at the heart of the implementation of gender-transformative measures, is a long-term process that cannot be realized in the course of the common project duration of three to six years. For this reason, close collaboration with local authorities and non-governmental organizations is imperative, as is their targeted capacity building. It is important to explore with them how, for example, training content can be disseminated to the local population even after the conclusion of the project, in order to provide long-term support for the dismantling and transformation of discriminatory norms and practices. Active support from the government is also needed, for example through the development and implementation of supportive political frameworks and the anchoring of appropriate measures in national strategies. Only this way can changes be achieved at the systemic and structural level.

► The Gender Model Family Approach focuses on the family as a central unit of social change, recognizing that sustainable progress in gender equality can only be achieved if change processes do not focus exclusively on women and girls. Instead, the challenge of overcoming gender inequalities should be regarded as a collective responsibility of society as a whole. Sustainable, gender-transformative change requires the active involvement of men and boys as well as traditional and religious authorities. In this regard, targeted persuasion is of crucial importance, highlighting the positive effects of changed social norms and ways of behaviour and promoting broad social mobilization for gender equality.

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Illustrations

Cover photo: Woman from a Gender Model Family in her kitchen garden; 1. Women harvesting rice; 2. Simple cooking area with clothesline behind it, which was introduced as part of the LANN+ project’s hygiene sensibilisation; 3. Political map of Sierra Leone with districts; 4. Training manual for Gender Model Families; 5. A Gender Model Family couple with their children; 6. A Village Savings and Loan Association at its weekly meeting; 7. Garden with vegetables, fruit, and spices, with a rice field in the background; 8. Awareness poster on domestic and sexual violence displayed at the Ministry of Gender and Children’s Affairs; 9. Female family members are preparing meals; 10. A woman lays rice out in the sun to dry; 11. Selling vegetables at the market in Kenema; 12. Street vendors in Kenema; 13. Village in Kenema District; 14. Various legumes, rice, and groundnuts for sale on the market.

Fig. 3: Map of NordNordWest, license: Creative Commons by-sa-3.0 de, supplemented by Carolin Rosenberg; all photos by Carolin Rosenberg

Project characteristics*

- B4 – Intensity of research team involvement
- G2 – Gender index
- P2 – Participation
- A5, A6 – Target group index

* For an explanation, see Good Practice handout or www.uni-due.de/inef/inef_projektuehen.php

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INEF – Research Project

The research project aims to develop recommendations for state development cooperation. The aim is to identify measures that can better reach poor, vulnerable and food insecure population groups and efficiently support them in improving their living situation in a sustainable way.

We examine the interdependencies of poverty, vulnerability and food insecurity as well as gender transformative activities and impact in order to identify both blockages and success factors for development cooperation.

Based on literature analyses and surveys of professional organisations at home or abroad, successfully practised

approaches (“good practices”) are to be identified and intensively analysed within the framework of field research. In addition to a socio-cultural contextualisation, the gender dimension is consistently taken into account throughout. The local investigations focus on the participation of the affected population in order to capture their perception of the problems and ideas for solution.

The project is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) under the special initiative “Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems”.

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Layout

cMore.MEDIA
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ISSN: 2512-4552